

# Brodsky's Travelling Exile Pays Homage to Venice

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“DISPLACEMENT and misplacement are this century's commonplace. And what our exiled writer has in common with a *Gastarbeiter* or a political refugee is that in either case a man is running away from the worse towards the better”<sup>1</sup>. Brodsky pronounced these words at a conference on the topic of exile, held in Vienna in December 1987, situating his personal condition of dissident Russian poet in exile within a wider context of global displacements.

Joseph Brodsky's “flight towards the better” officially started on 5 June 1972, when he was deprived of his citizenship, with the charge of social parasitism, and was forced to leave the Soviet Union for good. An announced exile that had come after a first, forced displacement in the Northern Arkhangelsk region, in 1964.

A *cause célèbre*, Nobel Prize for literature in 1987 and Poet Laureate of the United States in 1991, soon after his expulsion Brodsky started an international and fortunate career of professor and lecturer, travelling extensively in the United States – his adoptive country – South America and Europe.

A “travelling writer in exile”, Brodsky was paradoxically granted the freedom to travel by the coercive act of the exile, at a time when travelling abroad was not allowed in the Soviet Union. Brodsky's Jewish heritage and a life led in constant displacement made some critics associate his figure to the mythical Christian character of the Wandering Jew. In this regards, David Bethea asserts: “Brodsky is also the quintessential Wandering Jew, having traveled more often and to more places than any other Russian poet in history”<sup>2</sup>. It must be reported,

nevertheless, that his Jewishness has always been a marginal aspect in Brodsky's literary work – he declared himself an atheist – and it will not be in the aim of this paper to investigate this topic further.

The wide geographical scope of Brodsky's production reflects his intense travel experience. European and American cities and countries are described in his poems and essays through the eyes of an exile, who – although feeling comfortable in the places he visits – is constantly seeking for a missing home country.

The forced and painful condition of exile soon became to be considered by Brodsky the poet's natural, even “privileged”, condition<sup>3</sup>, which could grant him a detached perspective from which to express opinions on the different contexts that surrounded him.

In this light, Brodsky's travel writing offered him an extraordinary opportunity to discuss his own transculturation, displacement, culture, history and geography, time and space, allowing him to make powerful statements, many of which have become aphorisms.

Since the beginning of his career, Italy proved to be a privileged destination in Brodsky's travelling: idealized before his exile as the homeland of great writers, musicians and artists, it later became the place where he regularly came to enjoy the company of his many friends – some of whom were his translators and editors – in a beautiful and culturally rich environment.

Brodsky felt indebted to the Italian culture, and asserted that Italy had always been “a revelation to the Russians”, referring to the cultural links be-

<sup>1</sup> J. Brodsky, “The Condition We Call Exile”, Idem, *On Grief and Reason: Essays*, New York 1995, p. 101.

<sup>2</sup> D.M. Bethea, *Joseph Brodsky and the Creation of Exile*, Prince-

ton 1994, p. 60.

<sup>3</sup> See G. Buttafava, “Interview with Joseph Brodsky”, *L'Espresso*, 6 dicembre 1987, p. 156.

tween Italy and Russia, that date back centuries, and that were severed during the Soviet regime<sup>4</sup>.

In his last years, Brodsky promoted the idea of creating an academy in Rome to allow Russian writers and artists to live and study in Italy<sup>5</sup>. The Russian Academy, financed by The Joseph Brodsky Memorial Fellowship Fund – which was founded in the days after Brodsky's death by a group of his friends – so far has enabled many emerging poets, mostly from Eastern countries, to stay and study in Rome for a period of three months<sup>6</sup>.

As a further proof of Brodsky's affection for Italy, he strongly fostered a collection of his Italian poems: the volume *Poesie italiane* was published posthumously by Adelphi, in 1996.

Rome, Florence, and Venice offered Brodsky the input to explore the main themes of his work – such as classicism and empire, exile and displacement, poetry and language – but it is Venice, “a work of art, the greatest masterpiece our species produced”<sup>7</sup>, that became his elected site, where he could find the *ostranenie* [estrangement] he deemed necessary for a writer.

Venice appeared in Brodsky's poetry soon after his exile and proved a constant presence in his work. The Russian poems set in Venice, composed between 1973 and 1995 – *Lagoon* [1973], *San Pietro* [1977], *Venetian Stanzas I* [1982], *Venetian Stanzas II* [1982], *In Italy* [1985], *Homage to Girolamo Marcello* [1988], *Venice: Lido* [1989], *In Front of Casa Marcello* [1995]

– provided the framework within which Brodsky had conceived his prose masterpiece, *Watermark*, which is entirely dedicated to Venice.

In this short excursus, which focuses on Brodsky's Venetian poems, I will take into exam the poem *In Italy*, first of the Russian poems translated-rewritten into English by Brodsky himself. As in the previous poems dedicated to Venice, the autobiographical elements are still dominant: Venice reminds him of Petersburg, following the common *topos* of Petersburg as Northern Venice, from the very incipit of the poem:

I, too, once lived in a city where cornices used to court  
clouds with statues, and where a local *penseur*, with his shrill  
“Pervert!”

“Pervert!” and the trembling goatee, was mopping  
avenues; and an infinite quay was rendering life myopic  
These days evening sun still blinds the tenement's domino.  
But those who have loved me more than themselves are no  
longer alive.

[...]

And the world's best lagoon with its golden pigeon  
coop gleams sharply enough to make the pupil run.  
At the point where one can't be loved any longer, one,  
resentful of swimming against the current and too perceptive  
of its strength, hides himself in perspective<sup>8</sup>.

The symmetrical structure of the poem – four stanzas of four lines each, with the same rhyming scheme *aabb*, reinforces the parallelism between the two cities. Petersburg, which is perceived by the author as the past “there”, is opposed to Venice, the present “here”. Brodsky's explicit reference to his parents' death explain the closing image of the poem – his hiding in a Venetian perspective – as he has no more reasons to return, but constantly keeps his eyes on the far away Petersburg<sup>9</sup>.

Brodsky, who grew up in a city dominated by a majestic classical architecture and a later massive Soviet building plans, demonstrates a deep knowledge of the terms that refer to architecture, as well as a mastery of architectural devices – such as symmetry, reflections, perspectives, points of contact and escape – that he seems to employ to

<sup>4</sup> Brodsky often referred to the influence of Dante on Pushkin, of the Italian opera on Tchaikovsky, and the Italian Futurism on modern Russian art. He argued that Russian culture suffered deeply when those links were artificially broken by the Soviet Union's isolationist regime: “Much of what has transpired in Russia – in its mental climate, specifically – is this unfortunate break's direct result” Brodsky wrote, C. Bohlen, “The Dream of A Poet for Italy”, *The New York Times On The Web*, link <<https://www.nytimes.com/books/00/09/17/specials/brodsky-italy.html>> (last visited 30/5/2016).

<sup>5</sup> He took as a model the American Academy in Rome, privately financed, where he first came in 1981, as a newly naturalized American citizen, and where he returned years later.

<sup>6</sup> See The Joseph Brodsky Memorial Fellowship Fund website <<http://www.josephbrodsky.org/about.html>> (last visited 30/5/2016).

<sup>7</sup> J. Brodsky, *Watermark: An Essay on Venice*, New York 1992, p. 116.

<sup>8</sup> Idem, *Collected Poems in English*, edited by A. Kjellberg, New York 2000, p. 340. For the English version of Brodsky's poems, I refer to this edition.

<sup>9</sup> As a biographical note, we remind that Brodsky never returned his homeland, even after the fall of Communism, as a protest against his country, which ordered his expulsion, and which had always denied his parents the permit to visit him in the United States.

build his compositions. Through a game of mirrors that unites Venice and St. Petersburg, he is able to contextualize the two cities in his multicultural existence.

The second poem I briefly take into exam, in this path that leads to the prose of *Watermark*, is *Homage to Girolamo Marcello*, published in 1991. It is composed in unrhymed lines, a narrative that is close to the memoiristic prose of *Watermark*, which was written in the same years.

Once in winter I, too, sailed in  
here from Egypt, believing that I'd be greeted  
on the crowded quay by my wife in resplendent furs  
and a tiny veiled hat. Yet I was greeted  
not by her but by two small, decrepit  
Pekinese with gold teeth. [...]   
The quay was infinite and completely  
vacant [...] <sup>10</sup>.

In the title, the reference to a Venetian descendant of the famous doges' family pays homage to Brodsky's own biography, viewing himself as a modern doge<sup>11</sup>. The Marcello family is referred to again in Brodsky's last poem dedicated to Venice, *In Front of Casa Marcello*, which will be examined further, thus creating a continuity in his poems, a sort of a personal legend.

In *Homage to Girolamo Marcello*, Brodsky presents the lyric self as a mature author who returns to Venice, this time in complete solitude:

I could have surmised, I gather,  
that the future already  
had arrived. When a man's alone,  
he's in the future [...]   
when a man's unhappy,  
that's the future<sup>12</sup>.

The idea of isolation is reinforced by the closing image of the poem:

What seems to have survived  
is but water and me, since water also  
has no past<sup>13</sup>.

The water element acquires here a further significance: if in Brodsky's previous works it symbolised the passing of time, in this poem it is assimilated to his own life.

The assumption of having no past is in clear contrast with the opening line of the poem, when the author recollects a previous visit to Venice. The absence of a personal history, further than conveying in the reader the sensation of a meaningless passing of time, makes the author's nomadic condition a post-modern universal one, expressed with the generalization "a man". Brodsky is able then to reinvent his lyric persona, by going beyond his painful past of Russian exiled poet and to assume a new identity of accomplished American writer. His appeal of Western intellectual for the cultural preservation of Venice shows this transformation: this new author has found new purposes for his recurrent visits to Venice, as he recounts in the prose of *Watermark*.

This thesis is also sustained by Sanna Turoma, who affirms that "*Homage to Girolamo Marcello*, and *Watermark* even more so, exhibits the translation of the Ovidian exilic poet into what Bhabha calls the Lucretian postmodern subjectivity, which is freed from, though nostalgically longs for, the essence of the self"<sup>14</sup>.

*Fondamenta degli incurabili* was written in 1989, upon invitation of the *Consorzio Venezia Nuova* [Venice Water Authority], at a time of great political and, for Brodsky, personal changes<sup>15</sup>. The essay, written in English, as was the majority of Brodsky's prose after 1972, was translated into Italian by Gilberto Forti and published in an out-of-commerce edition. A revised edition in Italian was published by Adelphi in 1991, while the first English version of the book was published in 1992, with the

<sup>14</sup> S. Turoma, *Brodsky Abroad. Empire, Tourism, Nostalgia*, Madison 2010, p. 215.

<sup>15</sup> While teaching at the Sorbonne University in Paris, Brodsky met a young Italian-French student, Maria Sozzani, whom he married in 1990. They had a daughter in 1993. English became the language of his affections, "our common language" — as he wrote in the poem *To My Daughter* — and this furtherly moved him from a poetry written in Russian and self-translated into English (in the beginning he mainly used to supervise the work of other translators), to a poetry directly written in English.

<sup>10</sup> J. Brodsky, *Collected Poems*, op. cit., p. 397.

<sup>11</sup> As a side note, we may find a reference to his father, who was a marine officer.

<sup>12</sup> J. Brodsky, *Collected Poems*, op. cit., pp. 397–398.

<sup>13</sup> Ibidem, p. 398.

title *Watermark: An Essay on Venice*, then later simply as *Watermark*, in 1993<sup>16</sup>.

The Italian title, *Fondamenta degli incurabili*, refers to the former *Ospedale degli Incurabili* [Hospital for the plague victims], and evokes memories of past sufferings and isolation, which may be connected to the author's condition of exile.

Brodsky provides the key to the essay in the text itself: he took inspiration from a novel he read in 1966, *Provincial Entertainments*, written by the French Henri de Régnier, set in a wintry Venice, and consisting of very brief chapters.

*Watermark*, well defined as an "emotional guidebook"<sup>17</sup> of Venice, is first of all a heartfelt appeal for the preservation of the city. The ancient splendour of Venice, as opposed to a present decay, is compared by the author to his personal and his country's history.

Venice has enticed postmodern cultural formations of European and American intellectuals – and Brodsky belonged to them – but beyond this, in the essay the city is explored in the personal meaning it holds for the author.

The reader is accompanied through the city by Brodsky's brilliant thoughts and reflections, expressed through a mesmerizing prose. The essay has no plot and the narrative unfolds through unbound episodes, thus conveying the sensation of a dream-like haze. The reader, as the author himself, is only able to perceive the city, but never to grasp its meaning completely.

Teresa Stoppani, in her essay focused on the Venetian architectonic elements, which appear in Brodsky's work, asserts that: "In *Watermark*, Joseph Brodsky narrates his haptic experiences of a Venice made of surfaces and memoirs, materials and smells"<sup>18</sup>.

The title *Watermark*, beyond its literal meaning of filigree, suggests that the city is marked by water due to its peculiar architecture, on which water has left indelible traces. Furthermore, the fluid-

ity of the element on which Venice is built, represents the city's ambiguous nature, where the waterline (or watermark) on houses and canals traces the point of contact between a liquid and a solid, between material and immaterial.

*Watermark* is composed of one hundred thirty-five pages, divided into fifty chapters, each referring to a specific episode of Brodsky's recurrent visits to Venice, started – as per Brodsky's words – when "many moons ago the dollar was 870 lire and I was thirty-two"<sup>19</sup>.

For seventeen years, during Christmastime, Brodsky used to come to Venice. As the author says, "scanning" the city's face for seventeen winters (with a few exceptions for health reasons), he presents his personal vision of Venice, recollected in fragmentary chapters/episodes.

Here, he celebrated his first Christmas in exile, in 1972, as well as his last, in December 1995.

Brodsky explains the reasons underlying his yearly returns to Venice in these terms: "I simply think that water is the image of time, and every New Year's Eve, in somewhat pagan fashion, I try to find myself near water, preferably near a sea or an ocean, to watch the emergence of a new helping, a new cupful of time from it"<sup>20</sup>.

The prose of *Watermark* is poignant, elegant, rich in alliterations, assonances, repetitions of key words – as "city", "water", "time" – as well as references to Brodsky's own poetry (with direct quotations, paraphrases, and parallelisms)<sup>21</sup>, thus making it close to poetry, as Valentina Poluchina asserts in her essay "The Prose of Joseph Brodsky: A Continuation of Poetry by Other Means"<sup>22</sup>.

Moreover, many Italian words intersperse the narrative, as *acqua alta*, *pensione*, *stazione*, *nebbia*, *campi*, *bersaglieri*, "Capito?", *chinotto*, *panino*, that further to demonstrate Brodsky's ac-

<sup>19</sup> J. Brodsky, *Watermark*, op. cit., p. 3.

<sup>20</sup> Ibidem, p. 43.

<sup>21</sup> We find references to other Brodsky's poems as: *Nature Morte*, *Lagoon*, *San Pietro*, *Venetian Stanzas I*, *Venetian Stanzas II*, *Roman Elegies*, *Kellomäki* and *The New Jules Verne*.

<sup>22</sup> Valentina Polukhina asserts that "for Brodsky, in his last years, poetry and prose were, seemingly, virtually indistinguishable", V. Polukhina, "The Prose of Joseph Brodsky: A Continuation of Poetry by Other Means", *Russian Literature*, 1997 (XLI), II, p. 225.

<sup>16</sup> All the excerpts quoted in my paper refer to the 1992 edition.

<sup>17</sup> R. Donadio, "Venice in Winter", *New York Times*, 28 November 2010, p. 1.

<sup>18</sup> T. Stoppani, "Venetian Dusts", *Log*, 2009, 17, pp. 109-118.



quisition of the Italian language — although modestly denied by him — they serve to widen the audience to which the work is addressed to<sup>23</sup>.

Brodsky draws this self-portrait in the first autobiographical passage of *Watermark*: “In the unlikely event that someone’s eye followed my white London Fog and dark brown Borsalino, they should have cut a familiar silhouette. The night itself, to be sure, would have had no difficulty absorbing it”<sup>24</sup>.

The author presents himself as the typical gentleman traveler, popular in literature, but here we soon notice that his figure is darkened by the forthcoming night, thus switching the narrative from a realistic to a metaphysical plane.

As the narration progresses, the lyric-self description is made possible only in parallel with the description of the city:

I felt I’d stepped into my own self-portrait in the cold air... The backdrop was all in dark silhouettes of church cupolas and rooftops: a bridge arching over a body of water’s black curve, both ends of which were clipped off by infinity. At night, infinity in foreign realms arrives with the last lamppost, and here it was twenty meters away. It was very quiet<sup>25</sup>.

One the most quoted passages of the essay further confirms the metaphysical nature of Brodsky’s narrative: “The boat’s slow progress through the night was like the passage of a coherent thought through the subconscious”<sup>26</sup>.

In Venice, the Russian-American author undergoes a further transformation, becoming Baudelaire’s *flâneur*, who wanders around the city with the aim of getting lost in the uniqueness of Venice. The sense of sight in Venice is extraordinarily enhanced, and to express this Brodsky creates an exaggerated, almost grotesque, image of a body that becomes an enormous eye:

The eye in this city acquires an autonomy similar to that of a tear. The only difference is that it doesn’t sever itself from the body but subordinates it totally. After a while — on the third or fourth day here — the body starts to regard itself as merely the eye’s carrier, as a kind of submarine to its now dilating, now squinting periscope<sup>27</sup>.

We are reminded here of Brodsky’s famous witty humor, which he knowingly used to hold his audience’s attention.

The city, a labyrinth of alleyways and canals, belongs to neither land nor water, and its indefiniteness unavoidably leads the author to metaphysical reflections:

I always adhered to the idea that God is time, or at least that His spirit is. Perhaps this idea was even of my own manufacture, but now I don’t remember. In any case, I always thought that if the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the water, the water was bound to reflect it<sup>28</sup>.

Water becomes an iconic element in Brodsky’s work, and *Watermark* is undoubtedly a long digression about water; it is the primordial matter that finds its exaltation in Venice, with its multiple nuances and a connection to water imagery, often described with associations that may surprise the reader:

On the map this city looks like two grilled fish sharing a plate, or perhaps like two nearly overlapping lobster claws (Pasternak compared it to a swollen croissant); but it has no north, south, east, or west; the only direction it has is sideways. It surrounds you like frozen seaweeds, and the more you dart and dash about trying to get you bearings, the more you get lost<sup>29</sup>.

And further on, Brodsky offers new references for water, summarily closing his description of water in history with a lower register, that brings the narrative into a colloquial tone:

For water, too, is choral in more ways than one. It is the same water that carried the Crusaders, the merchants, St. Mark’s relics, Turks, every kind of cargo, military, or pleasure vessel; above all, it reflected everybody who ever lived, not to mention stayed, in this city, everybody who ever strolled or waded its streets in the way you do now. Small wonder that it looks muddy green in the daytime and pitch black at night, rivaling the firmament. A miracle that, rubbed the right and the wrong way for over a millennium, it doesn’t have holes in it, that it is still H<sub>2</sub>O, though you would never drink it; that it still rises<sup>30</sup>.

A music lover, Brodsky often associates Venice to music — and for him poetry and music share the same inspiration. One of his most renowned passages, in which Venice is compared to music, is the following:

the whole city, especially at night, resembles a gigantic orchestra, with dimly lit music strands of palazzi, with a restless chorus

<sup>23</sup> This topic has been investigated by Michele Russo in his essay *Iosif Brodskij: Saggi di letture intertestuali*, Milano 2015.

<sup>24</sup> J. Brodsky, *Watermark*, op. cit., p. 4.

<sup>25</sup> Ibidem, p. 7.

<sup>26</sup> Ibidem, p. 39.

<sup>27</sup> Ibidem, pp. 44–45.

<sup>28</sup> Ibidem, p. 42.

<sup>29</sup> Ibidem, p. 45.

<sup>30</sup> Ibidem, pp. 96–97.

of waves, with the falsetto of a star in the winter sky. The music is, of course, greater than the band, and no hand can turn the page<sup>31</sup>.

Brodsky accompanies the reader through the city, making him hear the music of great composers, admire the masterpiece of famous artists, and recite the verses of his favorite poets, in a grand celebration of art:

It really does look like musical sheets, frayed at the edges, constantly played, coming to you in tidal scores, in bars of canals with innumerable obbligati of bridges, mullioned windows, or curved crownings of Coducci cathedrals, not to mention the violin necks of gondolas<sup>32</sup>.

One peculiar aspect of Venice in winter, in the only season Brodsky – a Northerner – used to come, is its fog, which eventually becomes an essential literary device in defining Brodsky's fading identity:

The fog is thick, blinding, and immobile... In short, a time for self-oblivion, induced by a city that has ceased to be seen. Unwittingly, you take your cue from it, especially if, like it, you've got no company. Having failed to be born here, you at least can take some pride in sharing its invisibility<sup>33</sup>.

Recent critics seem to agree in asserting the importance of Venice as a "third space", after the Soviet Union and the United States, which find a correspondence respectively in Brodsky "young Russian poet" and in Brodsky "honored American intellectual"<sup>34</sup>.

Venice becomes, therefore, the site of a new lyric-self creation, a space in-between, where the author's identity is transformed into a more fluid subjectivity. This new author is able to express himself on an international level.

In this regard, Monica Manolescu adds:

Venice represents a station midway in the author's transatlantic itinerary and a powerful catalyst of discourses on migration, both political and aesthetical in nature. Located somewhere between the lost homeland and the land of exile, the Italian city

allows Brodsky to contemplate his origins and exilic transformations from afar, with the enriched perception warranted by Venice as a revisited literary and artistic topos<sup>35</sup>.

In an interview with Solomon Volkov, Brodsky affirmed:

You know, a person views himself as a hero out of some novels or movie in which he is always in the frame. My crazy idea is that Venice should be in the background. If some idea of order exists, then Venice is the most natural, well thought of approximation of it<sup>36</sup>.

More than a mere background for the lyric-self transformation, Venice is the necessary means to make it possible.

Furthermore, in my opinion, his repeated trips to Venice represented for Brodsky many failed attempts to a return to his home city, to which Venice – as we have seen – is always associated. On this topic, we may think of his poems *Odysseus to Telemachus* [1972] and *Ithaca* [1995], where the myth of the hero with his parting and returning is reinforced by Brodsky's personal reference to the forcedly broken relationship with his son Andrei.

*In front of Casa Marcello* [1995] is Brodsky's last poem on Venice.

The description of the author's fading physical and creative powers, and his forthcoming end, can be contextualized within the wider cultural theme of similar deaths in Venice, as represented in literature, poetry, cinema, and drama.

The sunset, metaphor for the ageing poet, is situated at the very beginning of the lyric:

The sun's setting, and the corner bar bangs its shutters.  
Lamppost flare up, as though an actress,  
paints her eyelid dark violet, looking both rum and scary.  
And the headache is parachuting squarely  
behind enemy wrinkles [...]  
The booming bells of the slant bell tower  
rooted in the ultramarine sky over  
this town are like fruits keen on falling rather  
than hitting the ground. If there is another  
life, someone picks them up there. Well, pretty  
soon we'll find out<sup>37</sup>.

The images of a sunset and a closing bar, and the reference to an actor's mask convey in the reader

<sup>31</sup> Ibidem, p. 97.

<sup>32</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>33</sup> Ibidem, pp. 59-60.

<sup>34</sup> See S. Turoma, *Brodsky*, op. cit.; M. Russo, *Iosif*, op. cit.; M. Manolescu, "Joseph Brodsky's *Watermark*: From Leningrad to Venice via New York", *Migration and Exile: Charting New Literary and Artistic Territories*, Newcastle upon Tyne 2013, pp. 13-28.

<sup>35</sup> M. Manolescu, "Joseph", op. cit., p. 15.

<sup>36</sup> S. Volkov, *Conversations with Joseph Brodsky: A Poet's Journey through the Twentieth Century*, New York 1998, p. 198.

<sup>37</sup> J. Brodsky, *Collected poems*, op. cit., pp. 435-436.

the expectation for a theatrical performance to performed (“Lamppost to flare up”), when finally the actor/speaker/poet appears on the scene. The idea of Venice as a great theatre performance, is supported by the known fragility of its building foundations, the facades of which can be likened to a masquerade.

*In Front of Casa Marcello* is considered by critics to be Brodsky's poetic testament. He foresees his coming end and describes it with two contraposed stylistic registers, as is typical of his writing.

Venice becomes thus the symbol of the ambiguity of existence, expressed in the poem through the two contrasting – but complementary – images of life and death.

Brodsky died of a heart attack in New York on 28 January 1996. After a first internment in New York, it was decided he would be buried in Venice, according to the wishes of his Italian wife Maria Sozzani. Brodsky's scholar and friend Lev Loseff thus recalls: “In the end, his friends in Europe managed to reach an agreement with the city of Venice. Brodsky would be buried in the old cemetery of San Michele”<sup>38</sup>.

In a humorous epistle to Andrei Sergeev dated 1974, Brodsky had expressed a wish to be buried in Venice, like the great Russian composer Stravinsky:

Though the insensate body  
doesn't care where it decays,  
deprived of native clay  
it doesn't mind rotting  
in a silly Lombard valley.  
It's still the native continent,  
the native worms.  
Stravinsky rests in peace in San Michele<sup>39</sup>.

The discrediting process Brodsky underwent in the Soviet Union – culminating with his exile – and the international acknowledgment that followed, contributed to create the biography of a myth, as the poet Anna Akhmatova had foreseen, at the time of his trial in 1964.

The burial in Venice further reinforces this myth, linking Brodsky and Venice inseparably, making this a new *topos*, also in the Russian creative mind.

With his last homage to Venice, Brodsky provoked a cultural response in his fellow citizens. Brodsky's Venice has become a tourist attraction: the places where he used to go have become sites of cultural pilgrimage, as well as his tomb in the Venetian cemetery on San Michele Island<sup>40</sup>.

As per a Romantic cliché, Venice, suspended between reality and imagination, acts as the perfect scenario for the poet's withdrawal from the international scene.

I let Brodsky's words to conclude this paper: his powerful and inventive prose once again is able to raise our vision above the horizon of cliché, always offering new hints for reflection, and challenging a foregone future. Venice – which he loved in a touching, unconditioned way – was the muse that inspired some of his most beautiful works, amongst which, beyond doubt, *Watermark* stands:

Let me reiterate: water equals time and provides beauty with its double. Part water, we serve beauty in the same fashion. By rubbing water, this city improves time's looks, beautifies the future. That's what the role of this city in the universe is<sup>41</sup>.

www.esamizdat.it Silvia Panicieri, “Brodsky's Travelling Exile Pays Homage to Venice”,  
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<sup>40</sup> In ideal itinerary in the footsteps of Brodsky should start at Harry's Bar, near Saint Mark's Square, where he celebrated his first Christmas in Venice, in 1972. It should continue through *Fondamenta degli Incurabili* – its original name has replaced the previous *Fondamenta Zattere*. When in Venice, Brodsky used to stay at *Pensione Accademia*, near the Academia Bridge, but the last two years he rented an apartment at *Palazzo Marcello*, on *Rio Verona*. *Locanda Montin*, a small guesthouse with a restaurant, was one of his favorite restaurants. Brodsky also liked to dine at *Trattoria Rivetta*, a meeting place for the gondoliers, where they still remember him. *Via Garibaldi* reminded him of Leningrad, for its famous Venetian Gardens, similar to Petersburg's Summer Garden. The fish market was also a place he loved.

<sup>41</sup> J. Brodsky, *Watermark*, op. cit., p. 134.

<sup>38</sup> L. Loseff, *Joseph Brodsky: A Literary Life*, New Haven 2011, p. 265.

<sup>39</sup> Ibidem, p. 303. It was originally published in A. Sergeev, *Omnibus*, Moskva 1997.